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AUTHOR Johnsen, John H.
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ABSTRACT

At Utica College, Anthropology 101 seeks to help students begin to detect ethnocentrism in themselves and others, to get an understanding of the varieties of cultural systems, and to see their own society as simply one example of shapes a society can take. An "ethnography project" is a useful device in advancing these goals. Students are responsible for becoming "experts" on a preliterate culture, and are required to share information about it with the class. They submit individual written reports, and also pool their individual expertise to develop group oral reports on specific kinds of societies. One semester Anthropology 101 was linked with a section of English 101, most importantly by the ethnography project. This resulted in many benefits for students, including a better understanding of the ethnographic material, better written and oral reports, a cannier sense of what makes anthropologists tick, and conceptualizing ethnographic writings as a form of literature. (SR)

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Anthropology 101 and English 101: Ethnography as Data Source and Text

John H. Johnsen
Associate Professor of Anthropology
Utica College of Syracuse University

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At Utica College the primary role of Anthropology 101 (Introduction to Cultural Anthropology) is as part of the general education requirements in the core curriculum. The overwhelming majority of students that take this course will not take another anthropology course, nor will the course serve as a foundation in their major program. Years ago, therefore, I shifted the focus and goals of the course away from a that of a traditional introductory course. The focus now is an introduction to the "world view" of ethnology as opposed to being an extended introduction to its history, theory, and methods.

There are three primary goals. First, I want students to begin to detect and challenge ethnocentrism in themselves and others. Second, I want them to have a fairly coherent understanding of the varieties of cultural systems that have existed. This should include an understanding that the variability is large but not bewildering, that there is some order and predictability in this variation and that there are some common elements underlying it. (We may identify this last point as "seeing the familiar in the strange.")

Finally, I want students to begin to see their own society as simply one example of the shape that a society can take, to see the possibility and legitimacy of alternatives, and to start developing some skill at being able to root out the underlying premises and dynamics of their own culture and examine them critically. ("Seeing the strange in the familiar.") A corollary goal is examining the impact of the expansion of capitalism and the development of the world system on tribal and archaic state cultures during the last five centuries.

A device that has proved useful in advancing these goals is what I call the "ethnography project." This involves the extensive use of ethnographic readings. Each student is assigned a separate ethnography of a preliterate culture from the fairly extensive collection in our library. The student is then responsible for becoming an "expert" on, or

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at least a spokesperson for, that culture, and is required to share information about it with other members of the class. Written and oral communication are important elements of this process, not only from the standpoint of the actual sharing of information, but also in terms of consolidating an understanding of the ethnographic material and underscoring its significance for the student.

Specifically, students are required to complete two assignments related to their ethnographies. First they must submit individual written reports. This has sometimes taken the form of a book report and is sometimes a more highly structured cultural inventory. Second, they are grouped together according to the kind of society they have read about (using the familiar division of preliterate cultures into bands, tribes, and chiefdoms, from the work of Elman Service [1978, Primitive Social Organization]) and they must pool their individual ethnographic expertise to develop a group oral report to the rest of the class. So one group will report about what bands are like, using data from half a dozen or so different band societies, another will report on tribes, and the third on chiefdoms. Through this process, most students develop, a sense of ownership of "their" people. They often become advocates on behalf of the peoples they read about, and frequently ask how their peoples fare in the modern world. I think that it has most one of the effective tools I have used to get ethnological novices to be able to imagine another culture radically diferent from their own.

Linkage with English 101

I have done my "ethnography project" for a number of semesters, but none more successfully, I think, than the semester when my Anthropology 101 course was linked with a section of English 101, taught by Dr. Mary Ann Janda. There were a number of general benefits: the class as a whole became coherent much more quickly than they would have otherwise; there was a greater spirit of comeraderie than in other classes (not always of the positive sort); they could complain about me and my assignments to Dr. Janda and vice versa; she and I could commiserate as well.

Not everything in the two courses was shared or integrated, but most importantly the ethnography project was. As part of their activity in English 101, students discussed the ethnographies that they had read and worked on the process of organizing their information into the group reports. Later , in the discussion, perhaps Mary Ann and I can describe the details of how that worked in her class, but let me relate some of what it meant in my class. It meant that, in general, this group of students had a superior understanding of the ethnographic material as compared to groups in other semesters. Their individual written reports were, on the whole, better, both in terms of content and form. And the group reports were similarly better integrated, richer, and more informative (again, on the whole) then were most groups in other semesters.

In addition, I think this group came away from the semester with a somewhat cannier sense of what makes anthropologists tick, through an examination of the structure of ethnographic writing. This created a basis for potentially the greatest benefit to the collaboration, which I'm sorry to say I did not perceive until the semester was over: the problematizing of ethnography. I confess that I have generally given short shrift to the notion of ethnography as a literary genre, despite the fact that colleagues in literature have occasionally called my attention to this dimension. Ethnography for me, as for most ethnologists, is data. The point is, of course, that ethnography involves at least as much data about the culture of the ethnographer and the audience as it does about the culture ostensibly revealed. Conceptualizing ethographic writings as a form of literature is one means of gaining access to that point. This can be of great importance for my course goals because of the focus on ethnocentrism and because of the specific thrust of the last part of the semester, which is the exploration of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the precise historic and cultural context in which most ethnography has been produced. The next time I teach the course, I will collaborate with my colleague in English in examining ethnography explicitly in literary terms, perhaps with additional readings from Conrad, or from Fanon, as a means of underscoring the role of ethnocentrism in many aspects of our

sense of the world and of the effect of Western expansion not only on other cultures but also on our understanding of them.